
In this volume, systematic theologian Oliver Crisp of Fuller Theological Seminary seeks to show that the Reformed tradition, historically and analytically grasped, is broader than many of its advocates seem to understand. Crisp, who was raised and nurtured in Baptist churches but who now identifies as Presbyterian, seeks to show that Reformed Christians, even when remaining bound by important Calvinist confessional documents and the authority of scripture, may properly hold to a variety of positions on a number of contested theological questions.

Crisp employs a twofold method to demonstrate the true breadth of the Reformed tradition. First, the author is committed to a project of theological ressourcement, shuffling through the writings of Reformed theologians of previous centuries to gain a sense of this tradition’s doctrinal variety. To offer one example, Crisp introduces his readers to John Davenant, a member of the English delegation to the Synod of Dort. Although Davenant is associated with the decisions of Dort, Crisp notes that this Anglican bishop, in his own writings, clearly made the case that Christ’s death was sufficient to atone for the sins of all people. Strikingly, this is an apparent repudiation of Dort’s alleged declaration that Christ’s death atoned only for the sins of the elect.

Having unearthed these seemingly deviant forms of Calvinism, Crisp subjects them to a rigorous theological analysis, seeking whether they are able to bear up under scrutiny. For the most part, the author discovers that these alternatives within Calvinist theology are no more vulnerable to theological criticism than those ideas often taken today as Calvinist orthodoxy. In John Davenant’s case, for instance, Crisp argues that “hypothetical universalism,” the idea that Christ’s atonement was sufficient for all people, is no more suspicious than the alternative, limited atonement view. He additionally notes that the canons of Dort can actually be read to make room for this perspective. Discoveries like this lead Crisp to note that “there is a softer face to Calvinism; the Reformed tradition truly is a confessionalism that tolerates doctrinal plurality within certain parameters” (p. 237).

Most moderate Baptists that open this volume will find its analytical style of theological discourse unfamiliar, and in at least one place Crisp expresses sensitivity to the fact that some will wonder if the questions he asks are really meaningful questions about matters truly within the ambit of human knowledge. At the same time, however, there are many young people in American churches who have become devoted, perhaps excessively devoted, to exactly the sort of narrow Calvinism that Crisp seems to want to modify. This book belongs in the hands of these young Calvinists. Crisp’s obvious love for the Reformed tradition and clear respect for scripture will make him attractive to this audience. They will resonate with his reasoning and erudition, and upon reading him, they may well find that their tradition is broader, and richer, than they had at first realized.

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